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ARGENTINA: THE FLOW OF VIOLENCE

Paradoxical as it may seem, Argentina today is enjoying one of its most peaceful interludes in nearly a decade. Since the late 1960's, left and right-wing terrorism and countermeasures by security personnel have exacted a devastating toll in lives and property.

Terrorism vs. military rule - 1969-1973. The immediate origins of the current political violence lie in the late 1960's emergence of terrorist opposition to the Ongania military government. A variety of groups reflecting different ideological hues took the field. The two most dangerous and long-lasting were:

- the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP), a Trotskyite group relatively limited in numbers but extremely efficient; and
- the Montoneros, nominally Peronists but devoted to revolutionary left dogma.

From the late 1960's until the military's exit in favor of a Peronist government in March 1973, the terrorists trained their fire on police and military personnel, government officials, and businessmen. The latter targets were kidnapped and ransomed for the millions of dollars that sustained terrorist activities.

Peronist interregnum - 1973-76. Juan Domingo Peron's resumption of power after 18 years in exile brought a gradual rise in political violence. After his death on June 1, 1974 and replacement by his widow, Isabel, matters worsened dramatically. In the three years after March 1973, an estimated 2,000 people lost their lives in what became a left wing-right wing vendetta. In the three months before the March 1976 military coup alone, at least 175 lives were lost.

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During this period, the ERP and Montoneros together with smaller groups could field thousands of combatants. They undertook full-scale assaults on military bases and arsenals. The best protected businessmen in the country were kidnapped and ransomed, in one case for an estimated fifty million dollars. Military and security officials were assassinated at random.

On the right, the notorious Argentine Anti-communist Alliance (AAA) emerged in 1974. It is still something of a mystery. It probably was run by Mrs. Peron's feared confidant, Jose Lopez Rega, and included off-duty policemen and labor goons as operatives. Unwilling or unable to get at terrorist leaders, the AAA concentrated on leftist intellectuals and political/labor opponents of Mrs. Peron and Lopez Rega.

Official counterterrorist responsibilities before March 1976 were shouldered mainly by the police. The Peronist government was not anxious to cede responsibility to a basically anti-Peronist military establishment. The generals, on the other hand, tolerated the deteriorating security environment in the hope that it would hasten the departure of Mrs. Peron and totally discredit Peronism as a political force.

Younger military officers undertook individual actions against leftist targets out of personal or political revenge. However, the armed forces did not assume institutional counterterrorist responsibilities until February 1975 when a limited operation was begun in the Province of Tucuman.

Military rule - 1976-78. Since the military junta headed by President Jorge R. Videla assumed power on March 24, 1976, there has been a dramatic reduction in the level of political violence. Aside from a temporary resurgence of terrorist activity in October 1976, the pattern has been one of a steady decrease in terrorist capabilities. Currently, the ERP probably has fewer than 25 combatants inside Argentina, and the Montoneros about 300-350. Their activities are largely confined to the southern, industrial zone of Greater Buenos Aires.

The counterterrorist effort has been a massive, combined effort of police and military forces. Brutal tactics on both sides have been commonplace, particularly in the first months after the coup. A brief sampling of events in 1976 makes the point:

--between March and August, military and police officers were assassinated at an average rate of one every day;

--in the course of the year, 16 Argentine managers of US firms were murdered; 14 were kidnapped;

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- on June 12, 24 refugees were abducted, beaten up and subsequently released; refugees fled Argentina at the rate of 250-300/month all year;
- on June 18, the Federal Police Chief was murdered by a bomb placed in his bed by his daughter's best friend;
- on July 2, a bomb blast in Federal Police Security Headquarters killed at least 20 and injured scores; apparent right-wing retaliation came on July 3 with the discovery of 15 bodies strewn about the city and July 4 with the murder of five priests;
- on August 20, 30 mangled bodies of suspected terrorists were found in the suburb of Pilar; the act was apparently in retaliation for the murder of a retired general;
- on October 2, President Videla narrowly escaped assassination at an event held on the grounds of a major military facility;
- on October 7, a bomb blast in a military club cinema injured about 50 officers and family members;
- on December 16, a blast in a Defense Ministry movie hall killed at least 14 and injured 30; and
- by year's end, conservative estimates placed the number of dead at 1,500.

By late 1976, the ERP was all but destroyed and the Montonero were crumbling under the counterterrorist pressure. Major operations such as those undertaken before March 1976 were no longer possible. Aside from two more attempts on Videla's life (February 18, 1977; June 20, 1977), only two "spectaculars" have been staged since 1976:

- the May 7, 1977 attempted murder of Foreign Minister Guzetti; and
- the April 11, 1978 assassination of an Economy Ministry official.

In the last 18 months, terrorist activity has consisted primarily of bombings and attacks against such-"soft" targets as unprotected businessmen, government officials, and retired officers. The incidence of even these low risk operations has

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declined. During the week of March 24, 1977, 158 bomb attacks occurred in the Buenos Aires area alone. In the month of April 1978, there were only about 10 bombings reported in the entire country.

Violence from the security forces has taken on subtler forms than the August 1976 Pilar massacre. Staged shootouts and "disappearances" have been two of the standard tactics employed. Several thousand people have been reported missing since the March 1976 coup. Most were probably taken by one of the security entities and must be presumed dead.

Possibilities during the World Cup. Argentine officials fear a resurgence of terrorist violence during the World Cup soccer competition (June 1-25). Exhaustive efforts are being made to prevent a Munich-style disaster. At this point, it seems unlikely that the Montoneros or the ERP would indulge in such politically counterproductive tactics. Rather, they will probably try to provoke repressive police action through reasonably innocuous measures such as distributing propaganda, interrupting communications and transportation facilities, and initiating demonstrations in or near stadiums.

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